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Combining the graphics arts and fine arts for artistic expression using the medium of printmaking

Linda Condon-Howe

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THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMBINING THE GRAPHIC ARTS AND FINE ARTS FOR ARTISTIC
EXPRESSION USING THE MEDIUM OF PRINTMAKING

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF FINE AND
APPLIED ARTS IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

LINDA CONDON-HOWE

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APPROVALS

Advisor: Name Illegible

Date: Jan 1985

Advisor: Name Illegible

Date: Jan 31 1985

Advisor: Name Illegible

Date: 1/23/85

Graduate Academic Council Representative: Fred Myers

Date: 3/27/85

Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts: Dr. Robert H. Johnston, Ph.D.

Date: 3/27/85

I, Linda Condon-Howe, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address:

Linda Condon-Howe

310 Oxford Street, #2

Rochester, New York. 14607

Date: _____

My thesis is dedicated to Ichiro Miyata

"To him all good things - trout as well as salvation - come
by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy."

P. 4 of A River Runs Through It

Norman Maclean

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Preface

This thesis is divided into two sections. The first deals with my development as a printmaker. In this section I will show how my education and work experience, which include both fine arts and graphic arts, have affected the growth of my imagery. The second section addresses my thesis prints. In this section I am concerned primarily with the conception and creation of the images rather than the technical production details. Only when the techniques are unusual or unconventional will I discuss them.

An Essay

I was always intrigued by the mirrors in our London house. My curiosity about mirrors had grown over the years because my mother, a very superstitious woman, covered them during thunderstorms, fearing that the lightning would reflect off their shiny surface and cause a fire. Her fear extended beyond mirrors. Other shiny objects, such as door knobs and brass ornaments, were also covered during storms. She insisted she was less superstitious than her mother. Her mother would not only cover shiny objects but would also hide the children under the bed, and sprinkle holy water around the house. But I found mirrors very intriguing; they became symbols of immense magical powers.

One day when I was about eleven, I skipped school and decided to take the mirror off the wall. It wasn't a large mirror, no more than one foot by one and a half feet. I examined it for awhile, and then put it under my chin so that I was holding it with the reflective side up. With the mirror under my chin, when I looked down everything that was above appeared to be below. I walked around our house holding the mirror under my chin marvelling at the peculiar reversal of reality. At the top of the door where the piece of wall went up to the ceiling. I pretended I had to climb over it, and

imagined I was on a ship climbing over the door stops. Walking around on the ceiling could prove hazardous, and such things as light bulbs had to be circumnavigated very carefully. The biggest thrill was to go walking on the stairs, or should I say walking on the ceiling of the stairs. This meant I would be walking on a slant, and I'd experience a perilous feeling that I would slip or something unknown would happen. I'd then take the mirror out into the garden, but instead of seeing the grass I would see the sky. I'd pretend I was walking around in the clouds because the mirror would be reflecting the sky. Walking on the roof of our house was lots of fun; I'd pretend I was clinging to the roof tops edge like a mountain climber.

This fascination with reversed images was perhaps the genesis of my interest in printmaking. I used to think I was the only person who had done this; whenever I told the story I always felt people thought me a bit strange. However a few months ago on a quiet afternoon at work, some of us were sitting around and pulling out stories. A woman I work with and I began talking about our childhood experiences. The conversation turned to our mutual interest in printing, and we talked about how we had ended up working in this field. I told her how I used to walk around our house with a mirror under my chin when I was a child, and said laughingly that perhaps this was my first interest in reversed images. At

that point she laughed, because she had done the very same thing when she was a child. She was the first person I had come across who had done this, and was also fascinated with the reversal of reality. It seemed we were both destined to be involved in printing.

Although the mirror under my chin may have introduced me to the world of reversed images, it wasn't until my mid-twenties that I did any printmaking.

The art college I attended in Ireland as an undergraduate, was structured in a very rigid academic style. This college was divided into three schools: the School of Painting, the School of Sculpture and the School of Design. Entering one of these schools was contingent on completion of a foundation year. The foundation year was structured around basic design projects, and at the end of this year you applied to one of the three schools. I was a sculpture student initially, then transferred to the design school to study industrial textiles. It was unusual and frowned upon, for a student to transfer from one school of study into another school. Also only the courses relating to your discipline, were offered to the students of that school. For example, a painting student only had access to printmaking facilities, because the printmaking studio was considered part of the painting school's facilities. There was no elective or minor section to a degree course offered at this

college. Due to this type of structure one's artistic perspectives were narrowed, and one tended to develop and learn within parallel fields. This is very different from the structure of college education in the United States. Perhaps this rigid educational structure reflects the island homogeneous nature of Irish culture. Consequently, it wasn't until I came to America where I finished my undergraduate work, that I had my first introduction to printmaking.

I came to this country initially through a cultural exchange program that was set up by the Irish Student Union. This program allowed students to come to America for up to three months, after which time they returned to Ireland to continue with their studies. This exchange program afforded the opportunity to Irish students to come here to live and work on a temporary basis. For those students who didn't leave the country when their three month visa expired, it then offered them the opportunity to become illegal aliens.

I remember how exciting it was to land at Kennedy airport for the first time. Until then my experience with the United States had been limited. These experiences had come through shows on television, such as cowboy and Indian movies and programs like "Drag Net", and "I Love Lucy". My impressions came also from the retired American tourist groups ferried around the Irish countryside in large sleek buses. The elderly women of this group were disrespectfully referred to

by us young thugs, as the "blue rinse brigade," because of their dyed grey hair. Then there were the lost young wandering hippies looking for an alternate way of life, and a refuge away from America in the late sixties.

During my first and subsequent summers that I spent working and travelling in this country, my limited experiences of American life were greatly expanded. I became aware of the incredible diversity of existence here. Diversity of race, culture, political thought, religious beliefs and landscape. This was a new rainbow of life, that offered a refreshing spectrum in comparison to the insularness of Irish life.

When I came to live here permanently nine years ago, I worked for a few years as a graphic artist, before deciding to return to college. My degree from Dublin was a four year degree and equivalent to a bachelor's of art, but employers here were unsure of its creditability. For this reason and others I went back to college, and during my first semester as a senior I enrolled in a intaglio course. My aptitude and interest in printmaking developed quickly, and I spent more of my time in the printmaking studio. I remember feeling a certain affinity with the technical/process side of this art form, and an excitement that came from drawing on the exquisite surface of a litho stone. I was also excited with the direct way in which you could produce an image. I moved

to Boston when I graduated, and worked in a printmaking studio there for a few years before coming to graduate school.

Some background information on the type of imagery I produced a few years ago is important to review at this time, because of its relationship to the progression of my imagery, and my way of working.

I feel my early prints reflect an approach and work pattern that developed while I was a textile design student. These years were spent calculating and planning, with exacting detail, woven sample designs. A tremendous amount of time was devoted to developing and researching textile patterns, as well as considering the economic factors involved, and the specific application of each designs. There was little room for change in the design once chosen and in the production stage.

In my early prints I spent extensive hours drawing and planning my image, before I started working it on the stone or plate. I would have completely developed my image on paper before I began drawing it on the stone. The drawing on the stone was almost a complete copy of the original drawing on paper. There was very little spontaneity in these prints, and I made no allowances for change or development of the image as I worked. My early prints I refer to as story/narrative prints. These prints were usually visual

interpretations of interesting stories I would hear. This static and limited way of working I feel was influenced in part by my design background. Also due to the rigid course structure at the art college in Dublin, you tended to develop along parallel fields. You were not encouraged to look beyond what were considered the relevant courses in your discipline. These factors combined influenced my ability initially as a printmaker to produce visual images, and set a work pattern that inhibited a more spontaneous and intuitive approach to producing imagery.

This is very different from the way I like to work now. The less constrained approach I have to my work is due in part to familiarity with the medium. Also to an expanded educational and cultural perspective, that has come from working and studying in the United States for the past nine years.

In image making I now allow the image and color to emerge as I work, to such an extent that I work without planning the image before I begin creating it. I have learned to trust myself more, and I'm not as constricted in the process of creating my imagery. Each decision in this process is made one step at a time. It's difficult for me to work in this way, because I'm used to a more controlled situation. I have learned to accept the anxiety of possible failure, which is much more likely working in this manner. I

feel it has been very important for my growth as an artist, to have abandoned my former style of working and image making. When I am working in a more intuitive way I feel closer to some internal creative vein. The "tremendous creative potential that resides in chance"*1, I find is personally freeing, and it also opens up an exciting reservoir of ideas. The chance or random imagery I have worked with in the past few years, could only have developed from a less constricted approach.

I have in the preceding paragraphs outlined my past artistic, academic and cultural background. I have tried to show its influence to my growth and development as an artist, and its effect on my ability to produce imagery and my work process. I will now discuss my first year in graduate school and the emergence of my thesis imagery.

My thesis work addresses the possibilities that exist for artistic expression in the graphic arts. My interest in combining fine arts and graphic arts was initially sparked six years ago, when I worked for a large printing company in Boston. This company provided me with my first substantial employment in the graphic arts industry. I was employed in the pre-press area as an apprentice four-color stripper.

On a number of evenings I would stay after work and experiment with the negatives that were used for commercial jobs, that were printed on the presses during the day. I

*1 Adrian Forsyth and Ken Miyata - Tropical Nature - Charles Scribner's Son, New York - 1984 - P.165

would take a collection of these negatives, and arrange and rearrange them on a sheet of mylar set on a light table, until I found a composition that I thought interesting. When this point had been reached I'd secure the negatives to the mylar sheet with scotch tape. This image was then exposed onto a presensitized lithographic plate, in the large exposing unit we used at work. My first large image produced in this way wasn't printed until many years later when I came to graduate school. When I did print it, (my first quarter at RIT, on a very cold winter's night), I was very excited to see the powerfulness of the image that was transferred onto the paper. I included this print in my thesis body of work, because it is in character with the work I pursued for my thesis, and because it represents the beginning of my interest in chance or random imagery. However, other imagery I was working with in my first year at RIT was not indicative of this style.

During my first year of graduate school I became more interested in other areas within RIT, such as the printing school and computer graphics. I didn't feel I was developing very much in the printmaking field. I felt as if I was redoing old imagery, and for a period of time I became very frustrated with the work I was producing. Towards the end of the first spring quarter I considered leaving the master of fine art program, to pursue a master of science in printing

technology.

With my second year of graduate school approaching my thesis project demanded to be dealt with, as the deadline for submitting a proposal drew closer. However, I still wasn't sure what direction my work should take for this project.

During the summer I had started working for a printing company in the pre-press area. One day in late August I was at work sitting by my light table, staring vacantly at the moire pattern caused by two half-tone negatives lying over each other on the light table. Suddenly it dawned on me what my thesis work should encompass. (A true moment of insight you might say!). My artistic and professional interest had always been split between design and the graphic arts, and the fine arts. It seemed very appropriate that I should find a direction for my thesis work that encompassed these two areas. I remembered how successful the black and white image I had printed in my first quarter had been, and this reaffirmed my interest in combining these two areas for my thesis work.

I now set about in earnest exploring the possibilities there might be for artistic expression, using negatives and positives that had been formerly used for commercial jobs. I found the reproduction photography course I had taken during the summer quarter to be very useful, because it became an important tool for redefining used information. To once

functional information I could now infuse a new power of design.

I became increasingly intrigued by the chance imagery I came across at work. For example, the moire patterns caused by half-tone negatives, or line negatives discarded after a job was stripped took on new significance. I would loosely combine these negatives together at the edge of the light table. The dynamics and the delight of some of the resulting designs were quite interesting. I wanted to capture this type of image and freeze it for others to view. I wanted to take these scraps and give them a new, permanent life. I was unsure technically how it could be achieved. I knew commercial offset plates worked in a hand printed process, because I had printed that black and white image from Boston. However, I was not sure how color inks or half-tone images would print.

Many technical considerations had to be addressed before I began my thesis project. For this purpose I initially worked on small experimental images using offset litho plates, to gain a familiarity with the materials I was working with. I worked with these plates to experiment with line and halftone negatives, positive images and color inks. Humorously I remember certain nights after work, when I would stay at the print shop and make these plates that I later printed at school. How I would rummage around the press room

in the dark gathering samples of color inks, while knocking tins over as I went. I never could find where the lights for the pressroom were, and never remembered to ask someone else where the light switch was concealed.

In this experimental stage of my thesis I felt that a good resource for me would be the printing school. There I could gain additional advice concerning inks, plates and other technical details from the instructors. As a graduate student my minor was printing technology, so I had already worked with certain instructors in the printing school. However I still had a general feeling of apprehension whenever I descended to the "A" floor of RIT. I felt this apprehension for a number of reasons.

Firstly this was a different world, with norms and standards that seemed very dissimilar to those of the fine art school. Also because I knew many instructors projected a wary, cautious attitude toward fine art and commercial art students. I was told this attitude had been molded over the years by a procession of fine art students, who wanted to use their facilities, who had sloppy work habits, and who were not interested in taking their courses. Having also heard many stories regarding different personalities on that floor from fellow fine art students, my apprehension increased about going there to get information and assistance. However, being Irish and believing heavily in luck, I decided

to chance my luck to see what I would come up with.

The large offset lithographic plates that I wanted to use for my thesis project were very expensive. I didn't want to buy a full box of plates at this experimental stage, and made a visit to the Technical and Educational Center to ask if I could buy a few of their plates to experiment with. To my delight and surprise they were very accomodating, and let me use their plates, once I explained what my project entailed. This experience made me feel more comfortable with the "A" floor.

The next problem that confronted me was the mixing of inks, and gaining an understanding of the properties of off set inks, in relation to fine art litho inks. I did extensive reading on the subject, and also went to see Dr. Silver, who teaches ink and color theory in the printing school. When I met with him after class and told him about my thesis project, he was very interested and offered to help me in whatever way he could.

On another occasion I went to see Mr. Webster in the screen printing lab. I went to see him to get advice about cleaning my screen, with which I was having problems. To my suprise he gave me bottles of cleaner to try, and told me to come back and see him again if they didn't work. I tried the solution he gave me and found that it cleaned my screen very well. By now my apprehensions about the "A" floor were

quelled. In retrospect, I don't recall a time when I asked for assistance or advise there and was treated adversely.

My association with the printing school in my graduate program and thesis project was very important, both for the evolving of my thesis imagery and the means by which to produce it, and the development, professionally, of my graphic arts expertise. I think it is unfortunate that the official departmental avenues of communication between these two schools are weak and undeveloped. I strongly feel much more could be developed between the fine art school and the printing school, to maximize each school's combined potential. This would encourage joint projects between these two schools. It would also encourage fine art students to explore the graphic arts for artistic expression, and as an area for employment after college. It would also lessen the difficulties that arise in gaining access to printing school courses, when not a student of that school.

In my thesis work and a printing project involving the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, I have worked closely with many areas in the printing school. The instructors I have worked with I found to be very willing individuals. They were excited about using their knowledge, technical expertise and equipment to help create an artistic endeavor. Despite the sometimes puzzled and bemused look on their faces, and doubtful tone in their voices when presented with my

"abstract" looking imagery.

Illustrations

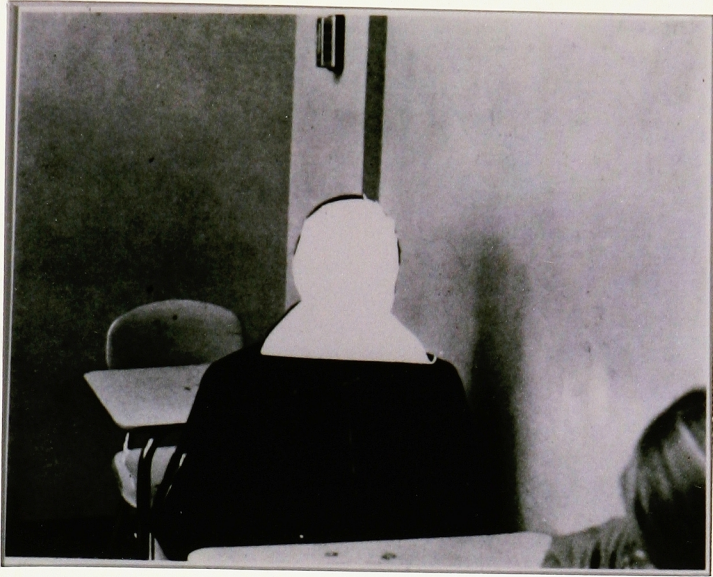
- 1A Untitled - 26x39 - Lithograph 1982.
- 2A Floating Shapes - 25x36 - Lithograph/Cardigraph 1982.
- 2B Floating Shapes - 25x36 - Lithograph 1982.
- 2C Floating Shapes - 25x36 - Lithograph 1982.
- 3A My Mind is a Blank Today - 10x12 - Lithograph 1982.
- 4A School Days No 1 - 10x12 - Lithograph 1982.
- 5A School Days No 2 - 10x12 - Lithograph 1982.
- 6A General Duplicating Rearrange - 26x36 - Lithograph 1982.
- 7A T.V. Print - 26x36 - Lithograph/Embossing 1983.
- 8A Random Finale - 26x36 - Lithograph 1983.

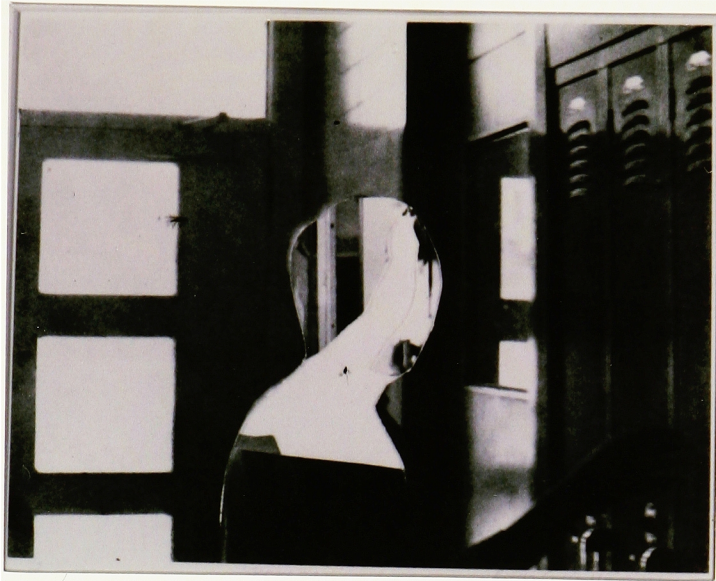




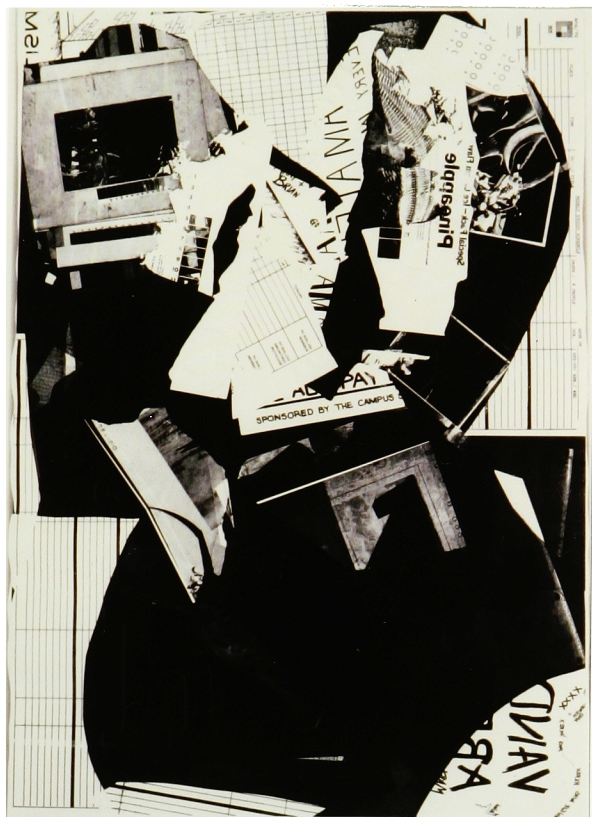














Black and White Lithograph(1A)

The plate for this print was made in Boston. It consists of negatives that had originally been stripped for production printing of postcards. The company I worked for at that time printed postcards, greeting cards, and holiday brochures among other things.

I cut up the used negatives, and arranged them on a sheet of mylar until I was satisfied with the composition. I then secured the pieces to the mylar sheet with tape, and exposed it on to the presensitized plate in the large industrial plate maker we used at work. The mylar flat was slightly more than one quarter the size of the plate, and I exposed the flat four times on the plate, turning it to a different position each time. As I exposed a section of the plate I covered the other parts so that they didn't get exposed. The plate was then processed, preserved in gum, and stored.

When I made this plate I had no idea when it would be printed. I hadn't worked with such a large image before, and I didn't know of any facilities where I could print a plate of this size. I wasn't thinking of these aspects when I made the plate. I thought of it as a interesting project. I printed this plate for the first time when I came to RIT and had the proper printing facilities.

Floating Shapes(2A)(2B)(2C)

"Floating Shapes" was made by combining information from two old prints. One of the images is from a positive made for a screen print. This positive had been pinned on my studio wall for some time over a stencil I had used when working with a viscosity rolled cardboard print. The cut outs, in the stencil enabled color to be deposited in specific areas for a third viscosity roll. I had kept this stencil because when I peeled the stencil from the cardboard plate, there was a very interesting pattern on the underside of the stencil which had come in contact with the inked cardboard plate. Both of these had been hanging on my wall for a number of months. Occasionally I considered ways that I could combine the two images.

Last summer I enrolled in a course in the printing school called Graphic Art Reproduction photography. In this course I learned more advanced camera work, such as how to make black and white halftones. My knowledge of graphic arts photography expanded my horizons for creating imagery and made possible "Floating Shapes" print and also "My School Days" series of prints.

With my recently acquired knowledge of graphic arts photography it now became possible to combine the two images. The stencil that I had used for the viscosity print originally measured 23X30 inches; I cut this into six

sections. These pieces were small enough so that I could make halftones of them. I made six halftone negatives of the stencil, then carefully spliced the image back together again. I exposed this negative onto a presensitized plate. The halftone reproduced the very fine detail from the underside of the stencil. I re-shot the positive image as a negative and exposed it onto another plate. The halftone image was printed first then the line negative was printed over it. Most of the subtleties that were on the back of the stencil were faithfully reproduced.

I experimented with this plate quite a bit. I tried different colors for the halftone image (2B)(2C), also allowing varying amounts of the line negative to print over the halftone. The amorphic shapes in the print are the negative shapes from the original positive shapes in the viscosity print. The finished viscosity print was multicolored, but I also printed it in black and white. Using the amorphic shapes from the black and white print I made a halftone of these shapes. I printed these halftone shapes onto a single sheet of paper, then cut around the shapes and applied them with glue to the print.

Another version of this print dealt with finding a way of bringing the original viscosity print, and the new version of the print closer together again (2A). To do this I traced the amorphic shapes from the original black and white

cardboard print, and used these as templates to cut new shapes from cardboard. These cardboard shapes when sealed with lacquer were inked up and printed on a sheet of paper. I again cut around these shapes and applied them to the print. I feel that the four versions of this print are all equally sucessful.

"My School Days."(3A)(4A)(5A)

The series of prints called " My School Days" is made from composites of old photographs. When I was an art teacher at North Middlesex Regional High School in Townsend, Massachusetts, a couple of student came to the art room one afternoon. They had a stack of black and white photographs from which they wanted to cut out just the faces. These cut outs were to be used in the school year book. They needed a place to work, and a couple of "X-Acto" knives to perform their task.

They sat in the art room for several hours diligently cutting out the faces from the photographs. When they were finished, they discarded the unwanted portion of the photograph. I retrieved the photographs from the garbage can and put them down on the table. For some reason they interested me and I decided to hold onto them.

Several years later I was sorting through a box of odds and ends and came across the photographs again. Looking at

them, I nostalgically recalled that high school and the many personalities I had come across there. A photograph of a former student who had been spared the knife, or a photograph of a room or hallway would bring on a rush of memories.

The photographs were strewn around me on the bed in a dishevelled pile, and I became intrigued with the compositional arrangements that I saw. For example, one photograph with the head of an individual cut out allowed part of the photographs underneath to show through. I picked up a photograph and placed another behind it, and then another behind that one. I was very excited by the composition. At this point I took Scotch tape and attached the photographs together. For a period of time I did this with many of the photographs, and then once again I put the photographs back in the envelope and returned them to the box.

Last winter I pulled out the school yearbook photographs again and decided that they would make interesting image material for a print. I made halftones from the layered photographs and enlarged them 200% from the original size. When the halftone was developed and stripped I exposed the image onto an offset lithographic plate. The plate was then printed in the printmaking department on a direct printing press.

I like the composition of these compiled images now

unified as one single unit through photographic means. Some of the prints in this series have an eerie, foreboding quality to them. At times I can also see them embodied with a sense of humor, especially the print "My Mind is a Blank to Day". These prints bring back feelings of my own school days. They were not the best years of my life as the saying goes; in fact I think in retrospect they were the worst. These prints contain elements of alienation and loneliness, a sense of not belonging and a great deal of melancholy. The lonely empty corridor. The body of the boy sitting at the table dismembered into strange parts with his arm in a sling.

General Duplicating Rearrange(6A)

The first large print that I printed after my experimental images was "General Duplicating Rearrange." I wanted to keep it looking very loose and unrestful and not allow it to get very fussy. I want the viewer's eye to keep moving around the image without allowing it to rest for too long on any one spot.

I was very nervous about this print because it was the first print I thought of as a thesis print. In "General Duplicating Rearrange" I wanted to convey the impression that the images were thrown together. That the viewer might have come across these pieces perhaps lying on the table or floor. I had never let an image be so out of my control, and not had

a substantial idea of what it would look like when printed. I printed two separate editions of this print. One was in black and the other in a reddish color. I liked the imagery when it was printed. There was a good sense of internal composition going on in the print. Intuitively, a balance had been achieved in this print without a lot of conscious effort. The print has good design and a cohesiveness to it.

Television Print(7A)

In this print I found that I wanted to have a tighter rein on the imagery I was dealing with. I wanted to be more selective in its composition. I played around with the pieces for this print for a long time. I moved them around until I felt very comfortable with how they looked compositionally. This print feels like a much tighter print than "General Duplicating Rearrange".

When I printed this plate I found areas of the print uninteresting. These areas were the dark solid sections at the bottom of the print, and I felt this area needed more to enliven it. During this time I was enrolled in a typography class in the printing school. I became very interested in type design and have included type in this print, both small and large characters. I worked on a number of versions of this print. For example, I layed cut-out paper shapes of letters on the plate when I was pulling an image. The

cut-out type blocked the ink from transferring onto the paper.

Another version of this print used extensive embossing of letters. In some parts of the image the embossing worked well, and in others it didn't. In the edition version of this print I was more selective in my use of embossing, and this proved to be successful.

Random Finally(8A)

As I worked with my images a desire to place greater control and selectivity of design on the composition steadily increased. I felt it wasn't satisfying or interesting enough to continue image making in the vein of "General Duplicating Rearrange"

This is The final print I produced for my thesis project and I regard it as the most successful of the series. In this print I combined purposefully made photographic material with discarded negatives. I also worked directly on the mylar surface with non-photo materials. I applied ink by brush and pen, and using a knife I scratched away at the surface of the negative, which produced some interesting marks. I cut out type shapes and combined them with mechanically formed type characters. I enjoyed making this print a great deal, because I used a greater diversity of materials to create the image. Also I feel I allowed myself to become more involved and took

a looser approach in creating this image.

Initially in my thesis work I feel I allowed photo process and imagery to curtail expansion beyond the limits of these parameters. Until this print I hadn't allowed myself to push the concept and materials I was working with.

I want to extend my thanks and appreciation to the following people for their help and guidance in my thesis work and graduate program:

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